
FATHER'S HOME DISAPPEARS

Father wanted to buy a home that would be permanent. He had been married five years, and he felt that it was high time to settle down once and for all. The little house at 251 Madison Avenue, which had been all right for a young bride and groom, was getting too small, now that there were boys in the family.

Grandpa Day smiled and told Mother that there was no such thing in New York as permanence, and that he had been forced out of four comfortable homes in his day. Father agreed that this had been so in the old days, and he also admitted that of course the town was bound to keep growing, but he thought that a man who picked the right district could now settle down.

Every respectable citizen in the seventies owned his own house. A decent three- or four-story house, unencumbered by mortgages, and situated within one or possibly two blocks of Fifth Avenue—and it oughtn't to be above Fifty-ninth Street or below Washington Square. Those were the usual requirements.

Father looked around carefully, he got the most expert advice that he could, and then he used his best judgment. As a result, he selected and bought 420 Madison Avenue. This was a sunny house, just below Forty-ninth Street, it was fairly near Central Park, and it was in a new and eligible district for good private residences. Brokers said that "the permanent residential quality of that whole section" was guaranteed by the fine public edifices which had been built in the neighborhood. St. Luke's Hospital stood on Fifth Avenue, from Fifty-fourth Street to Fifty-fifth, surrounded by big, shady trees and a broad grassy lawn. St. Patrick's Cathedral, at Fiftieth Street, had been recently dedicated. And Columbia College and its campus occupied a whole city block from Forty-ninth Street to Fiftieth, and from Madison

Avenue over to what is Park Avenue now, but what was then a broad open cut full of locomotives and trains.

In the seventies, there were almost no apartments, and people didn't move nearly so frequently as they do today. The old saying was that three moves were as bad as a fire. This move of ours from 251 to 420 bulked as large in my mind as the flight of the Israelites from Egypt, all except the Red Sea, and they didn't have to carry such heavy furniture as a Victorian family.

Mother used to tell us little stories about it for years. As I remember, the hardest thing to handle was Uncle Hal's clock—the wedding-present that he and Aunt Addie had given to Mother. At the top of this magnificent structure—which would have been more in place, really, if it had been erected in Central Park—was seated a robed and amply-built woman; below her was the clock face, and on each side, lower down, was a man, one of whom had a hammer, and both of whom looked kind of cross. I suppose it was an allegory of some sort, but I don't know what about. The woman seemed to be in favor of harmony, but the two men were not. To save this massive bronze statuary from injury Mother actually carried it up in a cab, in her lap, bouncing about on the cobblestones, and then went back for her five-months-old baby.

Our new home was a four-story brownstone-front house with a stoop, and it had all the modern conveniences of 1879. It had gas-lights in every room, even the cook's. We used kerosene lamps in the parlor, but that was only because the gas chandelier was too high to light without climbing up on a step-ladder. There was a convenient little gas-jet even in the cellar, which didn't burn very well to be sure, as it had only a small bluish flame, but which saved us from bothering with candles, which struggled to light up the ghostly pillars and dark silent shadows. Another convenience was that the big kitchen range had a grating in front that slid open, and a mechanical shaker to let the cook stir the coal fire. There was a round little Dutch oven for basting besides. In the long white-washed cellar there was a coal-bin, a wood-bin, a wine-closet, and barrels and barrels of potatoes and

cider and apples. And there was a fine hot-air furnace that roared and rattled and misbehaved itself wildly, which had to be wrestled with by Margaret, the cook, and probed into by Father. Most of the rooms had fireplaces too, which burned cannel coal or small logs, and gave out a fragrant glow on chilly evenings. The waitress was always lugging a coal scuttle or an armful of logs up the stairs, and until after we boys were older she had no one to help her.

On every floor except the fourth of the new house we had running water, and there were two shining tin bathtubs—one for Father and Mother and one for the rest of the family (three boys, Cousin Julia, an occasional visitor, and later a nurse and new baby). The cook and waitress didn't have a bathtub, but there was a white china water-pitcher and bowl in their bedroom, the same as in mine, and off at one end of the cellar they had a cold little water-closet.

All the plumbing was completely boxed in, of course, except in the cellar. When we opened the great, stately door of Father's bathroom and looked in there, in awe, all we saw was a long dark mahogany case in which his tin bathtub shone, and a forbidding mahogany structure beside it, three feet square and three high, with a solid closed cover on top. All the woodwork and trim of this room was somberly polished, not painted. A pure white Victorian bathrobe on a hook was the one touch of light. The walls were dark and the one little window was up in the high ceiling, where it opened into a narrow interior airshaft. The whole place had a dim, brooding tone, like a crypt in a church.

There wasn't any washstand in the bathroom—that wasn't the custom—but there was one in a box at each end of the passageway between the two bedrooms.

In nearly every room there was a bell-pull which jerked at one of the eight dangling bells that hung in a row in the kitchen. In each of the three upper hallways was a speaking tube too, and as these also connected with the kitchen, Margaret, our cook, had her hands full. The way to use a tube was to blow into it vigorously, ignoring the dust that flew out, until one of these blowings

succeeded in working the whistle which was affixed to the mouth-piece below. On hearing this whistle Margaret was supposed to spring to the appropriate tube and shout loudly up it. But Margaret was so short that she had to climb up on a chair before she could do this, and then, if it was the wrong tube, get down again, move the chair, haul up all her petticoats once more to make another climb, and when she had done all this howl up the next tube instead. By that time Father or Mother had lost patience and begun pulling a bell, and Margaret would clump upstairs to answer it, muttering to herself, "Such a house!"

On the first floor, a little above the street level, were the dining-room, pantry and parlor. On the second were Father's and Mother's rooms. The furniture in Father's room and in the dining-room was dark and severe. In Mother's room and the parlor it was dark but ornamental or rich. In all four of these rooms it was massive.

Our quarters up on the third and fourth floors were more simple. Little beds, light walls, plain hard carpets, and three shelves full of toys. Soldiers, building blocks, marbles, a Punch and Judy show, and five red iron cars. As we were all boys there were no dolls of course, and we had no books by women authors.

Our toys were made for hard wear and tear, and they got plenty of it. It was only at Christmas that any additions were made to our stock. We knew every battered lead soldier, individually, we knew almost every nicked block, we could tell at a glance just which boy every marble belonged to, except those made of clay which we called migs. And each brother had his own sacred place where his own toys were kept, except when the waitress cleaned the room and mixed everything up.

Our books were few but we read and re-read them, *Robinson Crusoe* the most. *Gulliver's Travels*, *Tanglewood Tales*, *King Solomon's Mine*, and *Pilgrim's Progress* came next. Christian's adventures were more exciting and real to me than anything in other story-books, and I was especially taken with Apollyon and poor old Giant Despair.

Down below our nursery windows, on the sidewalk, was a little

gas lamp-post. A German band of three or four pieces used to come of an evening and stand under its flickering light, reading their music, and tooting away on their horns. We were thirsty for music, there were no phonographs or radios then, and we huddled in the window, squirming ecstatically, and listening to their stirring marches. Sometimes Father would stick his head out of the front door and tell them to go away and be damned, but as soon as we heard him shut it again we'd toss down our pennies, wrapped in twisted bits of paper, so that they could see them, and they'd play one more tune.

Down the murderously dark and steep flight of stairs from the dining-room was the front basement. We boys had our supper there, and sometimes we played games on the floor under Father's big billiard table.

The daylight filtered in through an iron-barred window, which looked out into our "area." Sitting on the broad window seat, we could see the legs and feet of passers-by walking along on the sidewalk above. On days when the postman was in a hurry or when nobody answered the bell, he reached in his hand through the bars, pushed this window up, and tossed in the letters.

On the mantel was a clock of black marble, shaped like a tomb from the Nile. On one wall was an engraving of Rosa Bonheur's rearing horses being led to a fair. Each of us boys had his favorite horse in that cavalcade—in fact I had three. On the opposite wall was an engraving of Landseer's "Stag at Bay." We stood and stared at him in awe. Our other heroes, Crusoe and Christian, and still more of course Gulliver, in spite of all the adventures they had, were somehow at heart pretty humdrum. That stag was quite different. He was tragic and male and magnificent.

On the other side of the room from the stag was Father's brown walnut desk, where he made entries in his ledger of investments, or his household accounts. His mood while he did this was cheerful, if he and the country were prosperous. In bad times he flung up his head in defiance, and looked at bay, like the stag.

The top of the billiard table was kept covered with a grey rubber cloth. On nights when Father went down there after dinner and lit the four hooded gas-lights and took off and folded up that cover, the whole room seemed transformed. The engravings on the walls were in darkness, but the broad top and the gleaming rims of the table were flooded with light. A scarlet ivory ball and two white ones rolled on this rich green expanse, and Father stood studying them in his snowy-white shirt-sleeves, with his polished cue, inlaid with mother-of-pearl, in his hand.

Years later when I read about how artistically the Japanese could arrange single flowers, and how it made mandarins happy to stare at Ming yellow, I thought of this scene in our basement. It was my introduction to beauty.

For the first ten or fifteen years that we lived in 420, the neighborhood got better and better. Father's judgment as to its permanence seemed fully justified. It had become thickly planted with residences in many of which friends of our family were making their homes. We had grown fond of 420 by that time. Birth and death and endless household events had taken place inside its walls, and it had become a part of ourselves.

Then business began invading upper Fifth Avenue and spreading to Madison. A butcher bought a house near us and turned it into a market. We felt he was an impudent person and bought nothing from him for months, until in an emergency Mother sent in there for a rack of lamb chops. We then discovered that this butcher was not only an upstart, he was extremely expensive, and he was catering to the fashionable Fifth Avenue families and didn't care a rap about ours.

More and more of the old houses around us were made into stores. After 1900 some of the best people left, and soon that whole district began steadily sliding downhill.

All these changes didn't at first seem as though they would last. Many owners resisted them, hoping against hope year by year. But the Indians had to give way when the white men arrived, and when a group of gigantic white buildings sprang up into the air

at and around Forty-second Street, most of the old brownstone houses in our neighborhood finally disappeared too.

Father held on to his as long as he could. What drove him away at last was the noise of the new street-cars all night. The old horse-cars had had something human about them—they wouldn't have been much out of place even in ancient Rome. In size and appearance they fitted into the old human scale. The new cars were monsters, and the strident and unnatural din they made wrecked Father's sleep. After tossing actively around in his bed for what seemed to him hours, swearing resentfully at the misery they had brought into his life, he sometimes threw off his blankets and strode to the open window, in his bare feet and nightshirt, and shook his fist at them and yelled until he woke Mother up.

She slept in the back. She offered to take his front room instead. He would not give it up. She begged him at least then to stuff his ears full of cotton at night. He said he would not go through such indignities. He seemed to feel that adopting her remedies would be giving in to those street-cars. He said he'd rather move and defy them.

It was years after we left, as it happened, before I went back there. Then one day I had an appointment to keep in an office on the twelfth or thirteenth floor of the sky-scraper which had been put up on that site. We still owned the land and I knew there was now a sky-scraper there, but I hadn't seen it, I'd been living out West for some time, and after getting back I'd been ill. On my way down my mind was preoccupied by other things, and it wasn't until I stepped out of my taxi that I took a look at the street.

My nerves or my brain cells must have been unconsciously full of old memories, for apparently what I expected to find were two rows of short houses, set well back from the sidewalks, with the cheerful rattle of a wagon or two, or a cab, going by. Instead of that, there were what seemed to me immensely high ramparts that I couldn't—from the street—see the tops of. They rose up into the air directly from the inner edge of the sidewalk.

I felt them crowding against me. In the street between these ramparts there was a rushing bedlam of sound—hoots, roars, grindings, clashing. And on those once quiet sidewalks where we had spun our tops and slid down the railings, I found myself jostled by masses of hurrying people.

On the corner where the three pretty Lyons girls used to live, in a fat little house full of windows, there was a gigantic and grimy white tower heaving up to the sky. The sunny, irregular, red brick buildings which Columbia College once occupied, the lamp-post where the band used to play, even the flagstones were gone.

I went into the new and modern 420 and got into an elevator. Up we shot, past the floor where Father's four-poster and bureau had been, past the level of the nursery and my bedroom, on and on, up and up; and there, suspended almost in the clouds, high above our old life, was the office where I had an appointment. I don't know why I felt dizzy. I had been up in hundreds of sky-scrapers higher than this. I tried not to keep thinking of my childhood home, way down below. I pushed the button and in a moment the man inside opened the door, as casually as though everything were perfectly natural and he were living on solid earth.